

Wildflowers at the Lazy Sunrise Motel

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I'd seen the same foggy morning a million times. I wasn't sure if our SUV was cutting through it or being enveloped by it. Sometimes mornings like this filled me with wonder. The mist seemed to hold something beautiful and unexpected inside just for me. Other days the fog felt like dread weighing me down. But it was the same scenery. Only my mindset was different.

Whatever you think life is, it is. I heard that saying once. It's true. If you're positive, you'll see the world as positive and beautiful. If you think the world is terrible, you'll find evidence to prove it.

And lately I was pretty certain the world was a steaming pile of shit.

The vehicle was alive with chatter. My daughters Lucy and Miri looked at Lucy's book *Wildflowers of North America*, trying to decide which flowers had the best names. Their positivity in the face of bleakness filled me with warmth and wonder.

"American Hog Peanut," said Lucy.

"No way," said Miri, laughing. "It's got to be Big Devil's Beggarsticks."

My half-sister Zara cut in, regaling the girls yet again with tales of her far-away home.

"There's a restaurant in your apartment?" asked Miri.

"It's Grosvenor House," said Zara. "It has a salon and a market. And when you go out, you get the Aston Martin."

"Sounds fancy," said Lucy.

"You're posh as shit," said Miri.

"Hey," I said. "Don't say words like that to so aptly apply to your aunt's finances."

Zara and I hadn't seen much of each other as

adults. That's what happens when you have two different mothers and live on the opposite side of the Atlantic. She had been back in the U.S. for a week, and it still felt weird.

"Are we going to the Wildflower Sanctuary soon?" asked Lucy.

"We just have to unload stuff at the hotel first," I said.

We were finally going on that summer road trip. And all it took was my husband dying.

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"What's the deal with the wildflowers?" asked Zara, her first day back. We were in the kitchen drinking bad coffee.

"The girls are on summer break and they want to take a trip to look at wildflowers and stay at haunted hotels. Their dad gave them books about each subject before he died. Now they're obsessed."

I saw why Miri liked her book, *Haunted Hotels of Minnesota*. She loved ghosts and the dramatic. But I didn't think Lucy would care for the textbook-style of her book. But Luke had known. Lucy learned to spot opposite, alternative, and whorled leaf arrangements even before he died. This from the girl who threw away craft projects in an impatient huff before the glue had set. Luke had realized something I hadn't. Lucy didn't like making things. She didn't like the mess and noise. She liked observing quiet things in nature: a twig about to snap, moss roses spreading across a planter. Fragile things.

"That's fairly tame, isn't it?" asked Zara.

"They're not messing about with booze or heroin."

"Sure as hell hope not," I said. "They're nine and eleven!"

"We could all go. It's something to take your mind off things. Could be fun. You're obviously a stress mess."

"Thanks," I said. "But your poor relation can't just leave. I have---"

But my thought was cut short by the power going out. Zara and I stared at each other for a moment, then got up and searched. Miri and Lucy's bedrooms were empty.

"What's that singing?" Zara asked. "You hear that?"

We shined the flashlight down the basement steps. The girls sat on the floor with blankets wrapped around them. A Ouija board was between them. They chanted.

"Which of you is Sabrina?" asked Zara.

The girls threw blankets over the board faster than teens hiding a kegger.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Having a séance," said Miri, slowly.

"Why?" I asked.

The girls looked at each other.

"Because Candace Johnson said it was fun," said Lucy.

"Who the fuck is Candace Johnson?" Zara whispered.

"No idea," I said.

"Did you kill the power?" asked Zara.

Lucy hesitated, then pointed to the breaker box.

"I'm surprised you messed with electricity after what happened to your dad," said Zara.

The girls stared down at their blankets. They reminded me of sad puppies. Even when they're naughty you find yourself handing them treats.

"How did you learn to turn off all the breakers?" I asked.

They smiled and said in unison, "YouTube."

I looked at Zara.

"So," I said. "Should we go on a road trip?"

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"Thank you," said Zara, talking on her phone. She threw it back in her bag. "I knew we should

have planned ahead. Every hotel around is booked up."

Signs of town sprang up. A car dealer. A bait shop.

"Brainerd isn't usually so happening," I said.

"The guy at the Days Inn said there's a big chainsaw art competition this weekend. It's a big deal."

"Cool," said Miri. "Let's go buy a big flippin' carved bear."

"The only place I'm not sure about is some motel without a website," said Zara. "Up on the corner."

The Lazy Sunrise Motel was, well, pink. Pepto-Bismol pink. I don't think any of us had seen a business quite that hue before. If the color of the place, or the fact that it looked like twenty miles of bad road didn't convince us to leave, maybe the fact that it was almost empty when every other place was booked, should have.

"This place looks like a sad cake," said Lucy.

Inside, the walls of the sad cake were a deep red. The carpet was brown as a chocolate bar.

"They vacuum once a year if they have to or not," I whispered.

Behind the counter a pimpled teenage boy continued to flip through his fishing magazine when we walked up.

"We...uh...need a room," I said.

"For the whole night or..." asked the boy, trailing off.

"How could you not have a room for the whole night?" asked Miri.

Zara covered Miri's ears.

"Do you rent rooms by the hour?" asked Zara.

The guy looked sheepish. "Sometimes," he said. Zara cringed and put her hands down.

"You didn't cover my ears," said Lucy.

"You're older," said Zara. "You know the world is dodgy."

"We need one for the whole night," I said.

"Sure thing," said the teen, tapping at his computer. "You're not one of the chainsaw people, are you?"

"No," I said.

"Why?" asked Zara.

"I'm supposed to give them fifteen percent off."

"Fabulous," said Zara, slowly. "Because we are with them."

The boy stared. "Name one part of a chainsaw."

Zara stared back. "The...chain."

"Name another part," he said.

Zara flared her nostrils. "The saw."

The boy reached out his hand. "Ninety bucks," he said.

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We pulled our luggage up to the second floor. The girls stopped at a vending machine along the way.

I pulled an old tarnished hotel key out of my pocket.

"I remember when a *good* hotel room was ninety bucks," I muttered. "Now it gets you shit."

"And bedbugs," said Zara. "I'm going to sleep standing up like a zebra."

I was still fiddling with the door when Lucy shouted.

She was grabbing pretzels out of the vending machine while a greasy boy stood behind her, pelting her with darts from his Nerf gun. Miri stared on, like a pot of lava about to boil over.

"Stop it!" Miri said.

"Stop it," the boy said, mocking her. He shot some darts at Miri's head.

"Hey!" I said, stamping down the hall. Just as I reached them, two equally greasy parents stepped around the corner.

"What's wrong, Chace?" asked the dad.

"They won't play with me," said Chace.

"What?" asked the dad. "Your kids rude or

something? Too good to play with Chace?"

"He didn't ask us to play," said Miri, kicking her feet. "He just came up hitting us!"

"What do you expect?" asked the mom. "They're darts. You don't juggle them."

Before I could think of what the hell to say, the parents were leading Chace down to their room. As they passed Zara she put on her biggest smile and said, "Pleasure to meet you!"

"It's OK," I said to the girls. "Sometimes people are jerks, but we can't let them get us down."

"I wish we could have stayed in a haunted hotel tonight too instead of this crappy place," said Miri.

"Yeah," said Lucy.

"Chin up," said Zara, walking up. "This place may well be haunted too. And by the crushed red velvet that covers our room from floor to ceiling, it's very possibly haunted by a woman named Cherries Jubilee."

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The Wildflower Sanctuary was north of town. It was log cabin building. Inside were exhibits of how wildflowers used to look back on the prairie before people had changed the landscape. In the backyard there was a huge patch of wildflowers with meandering sidewalks you could stroll down. Lucy was jonesing to get there.

"I'm going to take a picture of a Wild Lupine!" said Lucy. "That was dad's favorite."

She glowed in the backseat, her camera in hand.

"Tell us about it," said Zara.

"It can get twenty-four inches tall," said Lucy. "With purpley pea shaped flowers that run up it. It's the only flower that the caterpillar form of the Karner Blue butterfly likes. And since there aren't many of the flowers left, the butterfly is endangered."

"That's a dirty shame," said Zara.

"What are you looking forward to, Miri?" I

asked.

"The gift shop," said Miri.

"Why's that?" I asked.

"Because every gift shop has geodes."

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It looked like we were the first ones there. Not surprising, seeing that it was still early. Lucy hopped out of the vehicle and was up at the door before the rest of us were out of the car.

"Mom!"

Lucy didn't usually shriek. She was the quiet, sensible one. Miri was the one with high-octane responses. But now Lucy's yell sounded like a mix of anger and accusation.

"What?" I said, walking up.

"Look!" she said, pointing to a letter taped on the door.

Closed for renovations. Will open again on Monday, June 15th.

"It's not really closed, is it?" she asked.

"Looks like it, honey," I said, trying the door. "Sorry."

"What bull," said Zara. "Didn't say anything online."

Miri looked at the door, then at her sister. Miri smiled faintly, trying to cheer Lucy up. But Lucy didn't take it that way. She leaned forward and punched her sister's arm.

Then the screaming started.

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The trip back to the motel was like a commercial for migraine medicine. Lucy cried and coughed. Miri taunted. Zara stared straight ahead, eyes like a frightened deer.

"Now this whole trip will be about Miri!" said Lucy. "She always gets what she wants because she's a loud mouth. All I wanted was this one thing and I don't get anything!"

Miri reached down by her feet and picked up her

battery-powered microphone.

"You're a baby!" Miri sang. "You're older than me, but just a little baby. If dad was here he'd laugh and you!"

"Hey!" I said, giving Miri my best withering stare in the mirror. "Knock that off."

I nudged Zara.

"Want kids yet?" I asked.

"I'll hold off a bit," she said.

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We sat in our crushed velvet room all afternoon. The bedsheets were rusty and the faded geese pictures were from 1972. The same music continuously blasted from the Chace family's room. I felt it in my chest. It shook the change on the nightstand.

"Does that crap pass for music?" asked Zara.

"It's Cotton Eye Joe," I said. "They played it at my eighth grade school dance. I hated it then. I hate it now."

When I suggested going out to eat the girls acted like pie was torture.

"I don't want to eat," said Miri. "I want to leave!"

"You want to get to your thing faster!" said Lucy. "We never do what I want."

Zara and I sat on a hard bed, playing cards.

"Sounds like us," she said.

"Hope not," I said, laughing too hard.

"What do you mean?" asked Zara.

"Well, I...uh," I said.

Zara stared. "Go on," she said, putting down her hand.

Tensions were high, and I should have let it go, but instead I said, "Well, we haven't had much of a relationship since I was seventeen."

"That's not true," said Zara.

"Come on," I said. "You barely even text. When I call, you hardly answer. You're screening your calls."

"Steady on," said Zara.

"You said ten words to me at Luke's funeral," I said. "When I needed you."

"You know I'm crap at funerals," said Zara, getting red.

"You're my sister!"

"My mother has been a masterpiece my whole life, and you've never had sympathy for me!" said Zara.

"Like that's the same!" I said.

Just then Lucy smashed her finger in the mini fridge while grabbing a Coke. She dropped the bottle and cried out. We all looked at each other.

Lucy's quieting sniffles were muffled by pounding at the door.

"Keep it down!" yelled Chace's dad. "Some of us are trying to enjoy ourselves."

"Is he taking a piss?" asked Zara. "Cotton Eye Joe and that other song on repeat all day?"

"The Hamster Dance," I said.

"And a girl cries once, and he loses his shit?" asked Zara. "Maybe we should go home."

I gazed at them. "No," I said. "It's been a bad day, but things will get better. Sorry, Zara."

"Don't sweat it," she said.

I walked to the fridge.

"You girls remind me of us when we were kids. Sometimes you cause mischief. So did we."

I grabbed spray cheese out of the fridge.

"Should we cause some mischief tonight, sis?" I asked.

"I should hope so," said Zara.

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In the dead of night Zara and I stood by the Chace family's minivan, covering it with three cans of smoky bacon spray can cheddar cheese. It was like the old days, except in the old days we didn't complain about being up at 1:00 a.m.

When the last can was almost gone Zara ran

over to our vehicle and sprayed some on the windshield.

"What are you doing?"

"This way we'll skirt the blame," she said.

"You devious dick," I said.

"Thanks," she said. "I come from a family of brilliant bastards."

We looked up at our window. Miri and Lucy stood in the bright light, cheering.

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"Did you have a nice stay?" asked the boy at the front counter the next morning.

"Lovely," said Zara. "The mint on my pillow was delicious too."

"It's an off brand of Andes," said the boy. "I eat about a dozen every day."

"Nice," she said. She was about to walk away, but then said, "And other parts of the chainsaw include the carburetor, clutch, and recoil."

On the way out the girls huddled around her.

"How do you know so much about chainsaws?" asked Miri.

"YouTube," said Zara.

Outside, Chace's dad and mom cussed by their van.

"What the shit?" asked the man. "And I washed it yesterday!"

The boy picked some cheese off and ate it.

"It's good," he said.

"Oh, no!" I said, looking at the cheese on our window. The family looked over.

"Damn punk kids!" said Zara.

"You can say that again," said Chace's dad.

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"Turn left," said Zara. We were in the middle of nowhere.

"I thought we were going to the haunted hotel in Stillwater," said Miri.

"We will," said Zara. "Just humor me."

Lucy scribbled something in her wildflower book.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Deciding which wildflowers we are," said Lucy. "Zara is a Northern Bluebell. Because Bluebells are usually British, and they can easily transfer from place to place."

"Lovely," said Zara.

"Miri is a Two-Flowered Cynthia. Because it's creamy orange easily separates it from the rest of the crowd."

Miri smiled in her rhinestone sunglasses.

"Mom is a Rattlesnake Master," said Lucy.

"Watch it," I said, laughing.

"Because you're different than all the rest and keep coming back again and again no matter what you face."

I opened my eyes wider to stop myself from crying. Zara smiled into the sunshine.

"What flower are you?" I asked.

Lucy smiled. "I'm a Poke Milkweed. People don't spot me all the time, but whenever you see me, I'm always with bees and butterflies."

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"Here we are," said Zara.

"Where?" I asked. We were parked along a gravel road.

Lucy looked out her window. "Wildflowers!" she said.

We got out of the car, Lucy racing to take pictures.

"How?" I asked Zara.

"I called a lady who works at that sanctuary. She said they planted some flowers out here that we could look at."

I hugged her.

"Sorry about everything," I said.

"I'm sorry too," said Zara. "Now you're going to get more of me than you can stand."

"Deal," I said.

"Mom!" said Lucy. "Look. It's me."

Lucy stood in front of a giant milkweed plant. More bees and butterflies than I had seen in ages drifted around us.

"It definitely is," I said.

Sunlight shimmered down on us, that late afternoon light. I don't know why, but sometimes when it glows creamy gold like that on flowers and trees, it makes me think maybe everything will be all right after all. It makes me think that even though there will still be nights when loss threatens to swallow me up in cold darkness, I still might find a way to smile somehow, or laugh. It's funny how a blade of grass can do that, or a wildflower. Make you feel like this is a beautiful place after all.

I took a picture of the girls in front of a Wild Lupine, Luke's flower.

"All right," I said. "Should we find a haunted hotel?"